The Role of Priests in Ministry to Those who Struggle with Pornography

By Fr. David Songy

Note: This article is part of the USCCB "Clean Heart" series and is a companion resource to the USCCB formal statement *Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography*; a printed pamphlet version of this article and others may be purchased at the USCCB online store.

Priests have a unique opportunity to minister to those who struggle with pornography use or addiction since the confessional is a true sanctuary: a safe, sacred place to find healing. Priests accompany people from birth to death as spiritual fathers and have the advantage of experiential wisdom, having heard many stories of suffering, anguish, and wounds, as well as accounts of healing, forgiveness, and hope. The following suggestions are meant to help the priest in this special ministry.

1. Be a witness to the joy of chastity through an example of faithful celibacy.

"All Christ's faithful are called to lead a chaste life in keeping with their particular states of life" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2348). The greatest help a priest can give to those who struggle with pornography is to testify to this common bond in a life of chastity and the hope of being able to love with the tenderness, purity, and passion of Christ. While a common misperception of priestly celibacy is that it leaves a man unfulfilled, empty, and incomplete, a priest who fully embraces celibate chastity offers an entirely different perspective.[1] His vocation is a call to donate himself freely, not to a particular spouse, but to the Church herself, and to be a spiritual father to many. He has the privilege of loving and caring for all of the people the Lord sends his way. A priest's example of living joyful celibacy can inspire others to embrace this challenging but life-giving virtue.

> **Our example of chastity as ordained ministers...helps show the world that it is possible to persevere in virtue with the help of Christ and that it is a gift, not a burden. —*Create in Me a Clean Heart*, p. 25**

2. Become educated on the widespread availability of pornography and its effects on men, women, children, marriages, and families.

Numerous resources are available regarding the pervasive influence of pornography on all levels of society.[2] Priests who are unfamiliar with the Internet and its effects should educate themselves on the insidious nature of online pornography so they may offer thoughtful guidance. For example, neurological and psychological studies have shown that pornography is highly addictive and has a similar effect on the brain as cocaine does on a person with a drug addiction or as alcohol on a person with an alcohol addiction.[3] Men and women may use pornography in order to seek comfort for emotional wounds, for "recreation," or (more common with women) out of a desire for romantic connection. Use of pornography can cause a deep sense of shame and low self-worth. A person struggling with pornography use requires the help of someone who is both mature and informed to help navigate the situation.

3. Make the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation readily available for the faithful.

If a priest makes himself available for his people, they will come to confess their sins. It may be necessary to consider being available at several different times and days during the week in order to reach the widest number of parishioners. Most importantly, he must be ready to give sound advice in the confessional.

Know what makes pornography use not only a moral problem but also an addiction.

Pornography use is a moral and spiritual problem, and may—but not always—be an addiction too. Learn to recognize the signs and effects of addictive or compulsive pornography use. In general, an addiction is present when the person is experiencing withdrawal and tolerance. Withdrawal means a person feels uncomfortable or even physically ill when he is unable to consume a particular substance (e.g., alcohol) or engage in a behavior (e.g., porn use). He or she may become obsessed with acquiring or viewing pornography and may take increased risks to view it, such as accessing it at work. Tolerance refers to the need to have more and more of a substance in order to feel satiated. A person addicted to alcohol needs to drink larger quantities of alcohol, and a person addicted to pornography needs to seek out more, and more intense, material. For example, someone may begin looking at homosexual material even if they do not feel real-life attractions to persons of the same sex, or a person may begin to pay for websites that offer more hardcore, extreme content. A man or woman with an addiction to pornography may continue their behavior despite adverse consequences to themselves or their loved ones, and they may feel helpless to stop the behavior.

> **Recognizing the harm caused by the sin of pornography, let us call the faithful to the Sacrament of Reconciliation often, making sure that it is clearly and readily available. —*Create in Me a Clean Heart*, p. 25**

A confessor should encourage a person who is addicted or is showing signs of becoming addicted, to seek the help of a professional. Have available a short list of trusted counselors, recovery programs, twelve-step meeting sites, and other useful resources. Also, encourage a person who has a problem with pornography to look at this sin in relation to his overall spiritual life and key interpersonal, Church, and social relationships.

Assess the specific problem of the penitent and his willingness to pursue help with this sin.

Ask pertinent questions, yet not too many. A confessor needs to ascertain the readiness and maturity of a penitent to receive help, and it is important not to come across as overly intrusive. The goal is to understand and to lead the person appropriately to the next step in the healing process.

Possible questions include:

- How long have you had this problem?
- How often and for how long do you fall into this sin?
- What advice have you received before that has been helpful?
- What have you tried that has not worked?
- Would you like help with this?

Offer practical advice

- Suggest short-term strategies, e.g., moving a computer to a public area, utilizing filtering software, or leaving one's mobile device with a parent or spouse at night
- Help them to identify events or behaviors that trigger Internet use: drinking, traveling, visits by in-laws, problems with a boss, etc.
- Help them to explore underlying issues: anger, loneliness, grief, anxiety, loss, etc.
- Help them to consider the quality of relationships they have and how these are influenced by the use of pornography
- Suggest that they consider how they view the people in their lives and whether they tend to objectify others

4. Boldly preach on chastity and tactfully refer to pornography use in homilies.

The key to formation in chastity is to focus primarily on love versus sex. What leads to serious sins against chastity is less a matter of the attractions of lust than a difficulty with loving real, concrete people. This is why pornography is so insidious. A person is able to engage in sexual activity that does not involve the complications of relating to a real person. Human relationships require suffering, hence the etymology of the word "compassion"—"to suffer with." People who choose online words, pictures, and videos are able to objectify others to the point that such "relationships" are preferable.

Boldly preaching on chastity is not a tirade against the evils of society projected in a moralistic tone; rather, a homily challenges people to love and respect others as Christ did. Each Sunday the priest shares how the Scriptures proclaim the Good News that Christ has made it possible for people to love each other just as God has loved us. Tactful references may be made to pornography as examples of how society is leading us to avoid true expressions of Christian love in marriage. It would be better to point out the isolating, objectifying, illusory nature of pornography than to focus primarily on the inherent sexual sin.

5. Learn of the local support groups, counselors, etc., who can help parishioners struggling with pornography use.

In a current assignment and every new one that follows, prepare, review, and update a list of resources. Ask the former pastor, current pastoral staff members, or the appropriate diocesan office for resources that are available in the area. Meet with potential counselors or ask more than one person about a support group one might refer others to in order to make sure that it would be a good fit and would give advice consistent with Catholic moral teaching. Have several referrals available, if possible, as it gives greater freedom to those seeking help.

6. Seek healing if, as a priest, you are struggling with pornography use, so you may effectively help others.

While it is a sad truth that priests themselves are not immune to struggles with pornography, perhaps a deeper concern is when a priest who is struggling does not seek appropriate treatment himself. This is not a challenge that should be faced on one's own. When a priest does not avail himself of help, he is not able to prosper in his own spiritual life and may even be contributing to the problems of others. A father who struggles with pornography likely would feel very conflicted in trying to discuss this issue with a teenage son or daughter. Likewise, the priest who struggles with pornography use may find it difficult to effectively guide the many people who come to him on a regular basis for help in this area.

> **We must not isolate ourselves. If any of us or our brother clergy is struggling with pornography, may we not be afraid to acknowledge this and to seek help immediately. —*Create in Me a Clean Heart*, p. 26**

The words of St. Paul may be helpful here: "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). The problem is not with being weak and falling into sin; rather, it is in refusing to turn to God after falling. It might be more comfortable for a priest to insist to himself, "I didn't really mean it!" than to reflect more honestly: "Yes, I am weak. Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." True mercy is a powerful healer. The priest only needs to ask for it and not to be ashamed at his weakness. As St. Basil tells us, "It is humility which often frees the one who most frequently and gravely sins."

For more information, including the full text of Create in Me a Clean Heart, please visit www.usccb.org/cleanheart.

Notes

1 While most priests in the Latin Catholic Church live out their call to chastity through a promise of celibacy, there are also married priests in both the Eastern and Latin Catholic Churches. These priests, too, demonstrate the joy of chastity by being faithful to their marriage vows.

2 See the work of the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (https://endsexualexploitation.org/); *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Collection of Papers*, ed. James R. Stoner, Jr. and Donna M. Hughes (Witherspoon Institute: 2010); Peter C. Kleponis, *Integrity Restored: Helping Catholic Families Win the Battle Against Pornography* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2014); and J. Brian Bransfield, *Overcoming Pornography Addiction: A Spiritual Solution* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013).

3 Studies include S. Kuhn and J. Gallinat, "Brain Structure and Functional Connectivity Associated With Pornography Consumption: The Brain on Porn," *JAMA Psychiatry* 71.7 (2014): 827-834 and D. L. Hilton and C. Watts, "Pornography addiction: a neuroscience perspective," *Surgical Neurology International* 2.19 (2011). See also William M. Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009) and Morgan Bennett, "The New Narcotic," *Public Discourse* (October 9, 2013).

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